



A DAY AT SCHOOL

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Slowly the boy awoke. He was about seven years old, husky in a squat manner. He blinked, opened his eyes on a squalid scene dimly visible in the early light of a mid-September morning. His younger brother was sleeping calmly at his side — lying on a filthy straw tick that they shared, and covered by an equally filthy partnership patchwork quilt.

Filth was the keyword in the description of the room the boy sleepily gazed on. It lay in the wide cracks in the rough board floor. It was visible on the black broken wallpaper that covered the four walls of the room. It lay in the foul close air, on the battered cook stove in one corner of the room, in the two iron beds where his two sisters and parents were sleeping.

The boy arose with a grunt. He slept in a faded blue denim shirt; it was but a moment's effort to step into the patched

pair of overalls. Shoes were unnecessary; the weather was still warm. He stepped out the back door into a lean-to that served as a back porch. A tin wash pan rested on the wreck of an old-fashioned wash stand. The pan was full of whitish grey water. The boy threw the water out, pumped the tin basin full from a rusty pump nearby. Disregarding the grey ring close to the top of the pan he splashed his face and hands, gulped as the cold water trickled off his face down onto his chest.

Having completed his morning toilet the boy turned, re-entered the one room hut. His mother was up, sleepily, grumpily preparing the eggs and greasy ham that would be his breakfast. She had wide hips; thin, stooped shoulders.

"This school is a hull lot of tomfoolery," she growled as she shoveled the greasy mess onto an unwashed tin plate. "Takin' a' able-bodied kid like you off all

day when you could be helpin' around here."

The boy didn't answer, merely sat down and ate. His mother yawned, went back to bed. She was heavy with child, her fifth in eight years. The boy finished his breakfast, stepped out into mist-filled sunshine. His father's car, a fairly late model in good condition was parked by the house. It was the one family possession of any value.

He walked slowly up the grassy, rutted lane to the highway. A feeling of relief battled with a feeling of dread within him. He was glad to leave the house, but he dreaded the day at school. The other children snubbed him. He was "that awful dirty Campfield boy" to the girls — "that trashy Campfield kid" to the boys.

His teacher was another matter. She was beautiful, young, and in a stilted, forced way kind to him. She always smelled so nice that somehow the room had a pleasant odor, despite the clammy smell of children. The boy sighed. He wished the teacher would take him on her lap, caress him as she did some of the other children. She was always making over the superintendent's kid, a fat sissy of a boy.

The school bus came in sight over the hill. Huge and orange, it always gave the boy a thrill when he first saw it. It rolled up to him almost noiselessly, sat patiently while he climbed in. He walked silently to the back of the bus — huddled in a seat by himself. The other children were chattering busily. Friendly spats, muted shrill voices created a muffled uproar of sound.

In what seemed to be no time the bus was at school. The boy was last off the bus, last to walk in the big dark brick building. Slowly he walked up the dark oily wooden steps and into the classroom. He went to his desk in the rear of the

room, slid into it quietly. He was terribly conscious of his bare feet and ragged clothes.

The teacher came, bright and cheerful, seeming to bring with her some of the spirit of the morning. A large ragged bouquet of flowers, the last remnants of summer, lay on her scarred desk.

"My," she smiled prettily, "now who was the lovely child that gave me these?"

The superintendent's son shyly held up his hand, giggled.

"Why, Tommy, you sweet, lovely child. Thank you very much. Well, it's a dreadful thing to do on such a lovely morning, but we will have to start the lessons. Arithmetic is first."

The morning passed rapidly, the alternated periods of study and hesitant recitation flying past. The boy failed in his attempts to recite. He knew his lessons, but every time he began to talk he felt the almost hostile eyes of the class, felt his brain go numb, his tongue thick.

Noon came. The boy sat in his seat till the rest of the class had filed out, then arose and started to go to the basement where lunches were provided for the "underprivileged" pupils. The teacher had been straightening up her desk. As he started to walk out the door she looked, hesitated for a split second, then plunged.

"Johnny—"

The boy turned, looked at her with a questioning look on his dirty brown face.

"Johnny, come here a moment." Her voice seemed appropriately firm and gentle, and yet it just didn't ring true — even to the boy's untrained ears. "I want to talk to you."

"Yes, Teacher." Johnny stood timidly before her, uneasily shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"You're not happy at school, are you, Johnny?"

"No." It was a man's tone.

"The other children don't play with you, do they, Johnny?"

"No."

"Johnny—" she paused. "Johnny, I want to help you. Now you do what I tell you and the children will want to play with you. Will you do what I want you to?"

The boy's eyes gleamed excitedly.

"Shore will."

"That's fine. Now Johnny, starting tomorrow I want you to come to school with your face, neck, ears and hands washed very clean. Wear a clean shirt and trousers. And shoes and stockings, Johnny, shoes and stockings. Will you do this for me, Johnny?"

The boy looked doubtful.

"I'll try."

"That's fine, Johnny, I know you will. Now run along and get your dinner."

After Johnny had left, the teacher finished tidying her desk, arranged the papers that were to be graded. She felt relieved. At times this job was rather distasteful. She thought of her approaching marriage with joy. No more teaching! That awful child! Ugh!

The boy walked slowly down the stairs and into the lunch room. The room was clean, bare except for the long tables and folding chairs. There was a sour odor permeating the whole room.

All through lunch a wild mixture of thoughts churned in his head. Shoes! Where would he get shoes. Stockings! Practically an impossibility. A great wave of black discouragement swept over him.

He fought it down.

"I'll do it. I'll do it."

The afternoon was a hazy series of happenings that had no connection with anything. All the time grim determination was forcing its way through his body. How he would do it he didn't know, but somehow he must force his parents to give in to him. He could hear even now their sarcasm, sarcasm that would lead to anger when he pleaded. But he *would* win them over.

The driver had to tell him when he was home, the boy was so engrossed in his problem. He arose slowly, walked down the aisle, stepped onto the ground beside the strip of cement. Slowly, almost ponderously, he trudged down the lane, head bowed, thrust forward.

He looked up. There, less than a hundred yards from him was his home. It was a shack—boards, logs, and a few bricks slung together in a loose lopsided manner to form four walls and a roof. The yard was cluttered with boards and scraps of machinery. His brother and sisters, ragged, dirty children, were playing on the brown dust. The car still stood by the house, shiny and new, strangely out of place in the midst of filth and squalor.

The boy's feet shuffled to a stop. He lowered his head. His body seemed to slump, grow smaller. He couldn't cry, he just stood. Slowly realization burst in his mind. He knew, as the whole world knew, that he would never play with the other children.